Guest Editorial

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Defence reform is not an episodic administrative exercise but a continuous process of adapting military institutions, doctrines, technologies and industrial capabilities to the changing character of warfare. For India, this imperative has acquired particular urgency amid contested borders, the prospect of simultaneous threats, hybrid warfare and rapid technological advancements. The Ministry of Defence's designation of 2025 as the *Year of Reforms* provided an opportunity to consolidate earlier initiatives, address persistent institutional challenges and establish a coherent framework for transforming India's defence preparedness over the coming decade.

Building upon the Indian Army's *Year of Transformation* in 2023 and *Year of Technology Absorption* in 2024, this initiative recognises that meaningful change requires sustained commitment. The Army's identification of 2023–2032 as the *Decade of Transformation* reinforces the need to translate policy intent into enduring institutional capabilities. The challenge is to ensure that reform strengthens operational effectiveness, technological competitiveness and national security beyond the lifespan of any individual initiative.

The Changing Character of Warfare

The wars in Ukraine and West Asia, together with the operational experience of India's Operation SINDOOR, demonstrate how modern warfare is being

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reshaped by precision strikes, unmanned systems, artificial intelligence (AI), electronic warfare, cyber operations and space-based capabilities. They also underscore the importance of industrial endurance, resilient supply chains and the ability to innovate under operational pressure.

Technological superiority alone does not guarantee battlefield success. Capabilities can lose effectiveness as adversaries develop countermeasures, while protracted wars expose vulnerabilities of production capacity and logistics. For India, defence preparedness must therefore extend beyond acquiring advanced platforms to integrating capabilities across domains, absorbing technology rapidly and sustaining combat operations. Reform must connect strategic assessment with doctrine, force development, training, procurement and industrial capacity.

Structural Reforms and Jointness

India's post-Kargil reform trajectory provides an important foundation. The establishment of Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), alongside successive changes in acquisition procedures, represent significant efforts to strengthen jointness and improve defence planning and capability development.

Yet, institutional innovation does not automatically translate into institutional transformation. New structures require clearly defined responsibilities, appropriate decision-making authority and integrated planning processes. Jointness involves more than placing formations under a common headquarters; it requires the integration of doctrine, intelligence, logistics, communications, training and operational planning while preserving the distinctive competencies of each Service.

The contributions in this issue examine these challenges from complementary perspectives. Drawing upon the experience of India's first theatre commander, the issue considers the broader implications of restructuring the higher defence organisation. Articles on jointness and theatre commands assess their implications for future military operations, while examining the principle of *centralised command, distributed control and decentralised execution*. A further contribution analyses the doctrinal and training imperatives of jointness and multi-domain operations. Collectively, these perspectives address the organisational and operational foundations of integrated military power.

Institutional Transformation and Decision-Making

Structural and procedural reform must result in agile budgeting and procurement processes. This issue examines the necessity of institutional transformation in the context of emerging military technologies whose cycle time of development is extremely low and the need to improve the responsiveness of defence budgeting and procurement processes. The central challenge is to balance procedural accountability and financial discipline with operational urgency. Acquisition processes must preserve transparency while enabling the timely induction of capabilities relevant to advancements in technology and rapidly changing threats.

Emerging Technologies and Future Warfare

Artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, robotics, quantum technologies, cyber capabilities, electronic warfare and space-based assets are transforming military operations. Their effectiveness, however, depends on their integration into doctrine, force structures, training and operational concepts. India must shorten the interval between technological development, experimentation and operational induction.

The articles in this section examine the implications of AI-enabled kill chains and autonomy for future warfare; counter-unmanned aerial systems in an era of precision and mass; and technological sovereignty in next-generation short-wave infrared imaging. Another contribution assesses how AI, unmanned systems, robotics, cyber, electronic warfare, space and quantum technologies can drive military reform. These discussions are complemented by an examination of India's war doctrine in the context of multi-domain conflict.

Together, they highlight that technological modernisation must extend beyond equipment acquisition. Rapid prototyping, realistic trials, operational feedback and iterative development are essential to ensuring that emerging technologies translate into combat advantage. Equally, their employment requires attention to human judgement, accountability and the professional competence to operate in increasingly complex environments.

The two commentaries extend this debate by examining the gap between research and operational capability—the proverbial *valley of death*—and the need for stronger institutional and legislative foundations for defence transformation. They raise an important question: how can reforms move

beyond executive initiatives to secure the continuity, accountability and institutional support required for lasting change?

Defence Industrial Reform and Self-Reliance

The capacity to replenish inventories, maintain platforms and equipment and expand production during protracted wars has become an essential component of military power. India's pursuit of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* in defence seeks to reduce critical external dependencies while strengthening domestic manufacturing, research and development (R&D), and indigenous technological capabilities.

The corporatisation of the former Ordnance Factory Board, greater private sector participation, support for start-ups and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and the development of defence industrial corridors have contributed to the evolution of the domestic defence ecosystem. Nevertheless, self-reliance cannot be measured merely by the proportion of equipment manufactured domestically. Meaningful technological sovereignty requires greater control over design, intellectual property, critical sub-systems and lifecycle support.

The contributions on defence industrial reform examine both progress and persistent challenges. An assessment of the Indian Navy's roadmap towards self-reliance explores the maritime dimension of indigenisation, while another article considers how private sector innovation and MSME participation can strengthen the industrial base. The analysis of procurement reform focuses on procedural compliance to enhance operational efficiency. A study of Türkiye's emergence as a defence exporter offers insights into the relationship between indigenous capability, industrial development and export competitiveness.

These discussions reinforce the need for predictable procurement pathways, access to testing infrastructure and viable transitions from prototype development to serial production. Public sector undertakings, private enterprises, start-ups and MSMEs must function as complementary elements of a competitive and resilient industrial ecosystem.

The Human Dimension of Reform

Technological and organisational transformation must be matched by reforms in professional military education and training. Future commanders will operate amid information overload, technological uncertainty and

compressed decision cycles. Their preparation must combine operational art and strategic thought with technological literacy, critical analysis and inter-Service understanding.

The contributions on leadership, morale and professional military education, alongside cognitive readiness in an era of hybrid warfare, explore how the armed forces can prepare personnel for these demands. Realistic exercises, institutionalised lessons-learned processes and intellectually rigorous education are essential to developing judgement and adaptability. A mission-oriented approach, combining clear strategic intent with decentralised initiative, can further strengthen operational effectiveness.

Sustaining Reform Beyond 2025

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue of the *Journal of Defence Studies* approach defence reform as a systemic undertaking. From theatre commands and decision-making to emerging technologies, industrial self-reliance and professional military education, they examine the interconnected factors that will shape India's defence preparedness. The diverse perspectives in the issue demonstrate the value of bringing professional military experience, academic inquiry, technological expertise and comparative analysis into a common debate.

The *Year of Reforms* must ultimately be judged by the changes it sustains beyond 2025. Progress should be measured through improvements in joint operational effectiveness, decision-making timelines, technological absorption, industrial resilience and the capacity to generate combat power under contested conditions. Reforms must remain responsive to operational experience, subject to evaluation and open to course correction.

The decade ahead will test India's ability to anticipate change, learn from experience and translate national resources into strategic advantage. The objective is a defence establishment that is integrated in conception, agile in execution, technologically capable, industrially resilient and intellectually prepared for future warfare. If 2025 provides the impetus, enduring success will depend on whether its initiatives create a more credible, self-reliant and operationally effective Indian defence ecosystem for the decade ahead.